

VENTURA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT'S MOBILE SELF-HELP CENTER

Project Summary:

In November, 1999 the Ventura County Superior Court acquired a Mobile Self-Help Center to expand the court's existing self-help programs to meet the needs of those in the community who have difficulty accessing the Self-Help Legal Access (SHLA) and Family Law Self-Help Centers in the courthouses and the *Colonia* neighborhood of Oxnard. The Mobile Self-Help Center provides the same informational assistance, educational materials, and referrals to non-profit agencies and organizations that the SHLA Centers provide, but it does so in the form of a "book mobile" type unit housed in a 35 foot custom built motorhome. The Mobile Self-Help Center travels around the county visiting communities geographically remote from the courthouse on an established schedule. It is also used to respond to special requests from schools, health care districts and community based law enforcement programs to participate in educational forums.

The Existing Process and Specific Problem:

The court recognizes that for a variety of reasons, primarily economic ones, many people needing to access the courts must do so without an attorney. Often these people are elderly, disabled, single women with children, or others having special needs. Courts have traditionally operated with attorneys representing their clients in an adversarial system. The complexities of the law create minefields for those who find themselves in court without an attorney. As greater numbers of self-represented people access the courts the level of frustration and barriers to justice increase.

Many other people find themselves in crisis situations, without the knowledge of where they can go for assistance. They may have special needs arising from physical or mental disabilities, or children with special needs. They may be in the midst of a financial crisis and on the brink of homelessness, or are already homeless. Courts are not designed to address people's crisis or special needs. Courts are empowered to resolve disputes by applying the law to the facts. Often people need comprehensive assistance with problems that the court cannot begin to resolve, yet failure to address the underlying problems can lead to court actions that compound the original problem.

De-mystifying the law and making it accessible to people enhances their participation in, and respect for, our democratic institutions. As is often said, "knowledge is power." By educating people about the law, their rights and obligations as landlords, tenants, parents, minors, employers, employees, neighbors, etc., we can empower people to take responsibility for their lives, and their contacts with others.

The court acquired a Mobile Self-Help Center (Mobile Center) as part of its comprehensive program to augment existing self-help centers in helping self-represented litigants navigate their way through the court system. The Mobile Center provides informational and referral assistance to those facing a life crisis, and educational materials to those desiring to learn more about the law. The SHLA and Family Law Self-Help Centers located in the courthouses, and in the *Colonia* neighborhood of Oxnard, were not able to meet all the needs within the county because of geographic limitations. For some people living in outlying communities, limited public transportation creates barriers between the court and those needing services. Funding limits preclude the court from establishing permanent centers in each community. The Mobile Center can travel from city to city within the county bringing desperately needed services at a fraction of the cost of renting and staffing multiple facilities.

The Mobile Center staffed by a court attorney and driver, with the assistance of volunteer attorneys and law student interns, can travel to different communities within the county and target those who encounter the greatest obstacles in coming to court. Often these are the elderly, disabled, victims of domestic violence who lack transportation and live isolated in their communities, and the homeless. They are often unaware of court and community resources available to help them. Bringing court information and assistance to the people will help ensure access to justice to all segments of our population, particularly the poor, disenfranchised, and under represented.

Target Groups:

Since the court established its self-help programs many people have been able to get assistance at the court and its branch SHLA Center in Oxnard. For many however, remote geographic location combined with poverty, language differences and cultural issues often created an access barrier that they found insurmountable. Additionally, certain populations may be reluctant to come to the government centers where the courts are located for fear of reprisal from a batterer, or in some cases, fear of inquiry about their immigration status. For homeless individuals, coming to court poses unique challenges because they may not have a place to secure their meager possessions while in court. Also, many avoid coming to court for fear of being taken into custody on outstanding failure to appear warrants for unresolved infractions. The Mobile Center provides access to court information and related services directly in the communities it visits. The very act of going to people, instead of waiting for them to find a way to the court, helps to break down barriers, build public trust and confidence, and improve access to justice.

The people we see in the Mobile Center confirm the nature of the target populations we seek to serve. Many are elderly. Even if they still drive, they do not drive on the freeway or venture far from home. Many are non-English speaking and face language and cultural barriers. Many are homeless, suffering from advanced stages of liver disease or mental illness. Some also have immigration issues in addition to other legal problems. Almost all are low-income.

Work Team:

The court's then Assistant Executive Officer, Florence Prushan, first broached the idea of a mobile center. She had been intimately involved with the development of all the court's self-help programs. Her background with libraries allowed her to envision a mobile center similar to a "book mobile," that could take the self-help program on the road. The success of the branch SHLA Center in Oxnard proved the need for court services directly within low-income communities, and disclosed the special needs and concerns of immigrant populations when accessing government or court resources. Budgetary constraints made the opening of branch centers throughout the county a financial impossibility. A mobile center could meet the unique needs of distinct populations and communities without incurring the cost of opening more permanent facilities.

Through the dean of a local law school and one of the SHLA Center coordinators, a private foundation donor was approached to provide seed money to purchase the 35 foot custom built Winnebago. Sheila Gonzalez, then Executive Officer of the court, strongly supported the project. Under her direction, court administrators and staff designed the interior of the coach, and stocked the Mobile Center with materials consistent with those maintained in the SHLA Centers.

Existing "partnerships" between the SHLA Centers and other community agencies were utilized to ascertain community need and determine locations and schedules for the Mobile Center. The "work team" continues to expand to incorporate representatives from various community groups, as the court's outreach programs evolve.

Law students intern in the Mobile Center just as they do in the SHLA Centers. The students learn first hand how to interview those needing legal assistance, how to recognize legal issues and salient facts, and where to direct people for additional help. Students learn court procedure, not only from books, but also from actual contact with the court. Most importantly, students are exposed to the myriad needs of the community, and will hopefully take to heart their duty, when they become attorneys, "Never to reject, for any consideration personal to him or herself, the cause of the defenseless or the oppressed." (Business and Professions Code section 6068(h))

Alternatives and Selected Solution:

The success of the branch SHLA Center in Oxnard demonstrated the need for the court to reach communities geographically and culturally distant from the courthouse. Opening other branch SHLA Centers throughout the county might achieve the same objective as the Mobile Center, but the cost would be prohibitive. The Mobile Center can also be used in conjunction with other outreach programs to better acquaint the community with the court, how our justice system works, the importance of jury service, and general legal information. The Mobile Center can go to schools and health care districts to complement existing education programs where a legal component is missing.

Project Details:

It took approximately one year for the Mobile Center to go from an idea to its maiden voyage. A partnership of court administration, the presiding judge, SHLA Center attorneys and court staff, a local law school dean, a private foundation, and community volunteers brought the project from an idea to reality. Fortunately the court was able to build on its very successful and comprehensive self-help programs in designing and equipping the Mobile Center with the materials and staff necessary to provide quality service to the community.

A. DESIGNING THE MOBILE SELF-HELP CENTER

The Mobile Center was designed to replicate the resources in the SHLA Centers. The motorhome is equipped with video stations, computer terminals, and a law library with self-help style materials such as *Nolo Press* books and many step-by-step instructional materials developed by Mobile Center staff. Tables, chairs and workstations are arranged in a comfortable, easy to access fashion. An expandable wall allows for greater ease of movement within the Mobile Center. Court staff involved in designing court facilities and computer systems worked on the Mobile Center design so it would integrate well with existing court programs and services. The Mobile Center includes the following:

Education Materials for Youth. Videos and publications written for adolescents including subjects such as date rape, violence free relationships, youth law, rights of students and Teen Court. Information for parents dealing with troubled teens is also available, including referrals to programs on anger management, Teen Court, substance abuse programs, and parenting classes.

Computer Stations. Computer terminals linked to the court case management system allow the public to access information about their cases and other legal information located on the Internet. Legal sites are bookmarked for easy reference. Those with limited computer skills can receive assistance from center staff in accessing the information.

Video Stations. Video stations allow people to view videotapes on many subjects including conservatorship, which is mandated viewing by anyone seeking to be appointed as a conservator in a case. Other topics include landlord/tenant, consumer law, debt management and bankruptcy, parental responsibility, mediation, labor law, probate, law and motion, and how to read a contract. Many videos are available in English and Spanish, and special equipment is available for the hearing impaired. Many of the court's videos were produced in conjunction with the local bar association and a local cable company that filmed the videos free of charge in exchange for the right to air them on local public access programming. Through this partnership the public can become better educated about the laws that affect them, and the court can expand its video library without incurring additional costs.

Books, Pamphlets and Brochures. The Mobile Center has a comprehensive library with books written for non-lawyers, such as *Nolo Press* books, on subjects commonly

encountered by self-represented litigants. The Mobile Center also carries brochures published by the State Bar of California, community organizations, and the court targeted toward consumers of legal services, and other matters of interest to the public. A variety of materials are available to the public on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), both explaining what it is and how to proceed in different ADR forums. Through its “partnerships” with other community organizations, the Mobile Center is able to carry materials specifically related to resources within each community in which it travels. Thus people needing referral to a battered women’s shelter or consumer credit counselor can obtain resource information targeted to the particular geographic area convenient to them.

Self-Help Instruction Manuals and Packets. The Mobile Center carries on board the same instructional materials developed by the SHLA Center staff and used successfully in the stationary centers. These step-by-step booklets gently walk people through the complicated process of a lawsuit. There are step-by-step instructions for unlawful detainer cases, guardianships, breach of contract/collection type cases, personal injury, name change, small claims and traffic cases. Sample Judicial Council forms and local forms are provided as well as sample self-drafted pleadings for certain motions for which form pleadings do not exist.

Expanding Access to Legal Representation. The Mobile Center carries extensive information about how people can access legal representation, even if only for a limited aspect of their case. The Mobile Center staff works with the local bar association and the court developing strategies to encourage private attorney *pro bono* involvement. People are referred to the Ventura County Bar Association’s Lawyer Referral and Information Service, its Voluntary Legal Services Program (*Pro Bono*), and local legal aid providers. With the expansion of “unbundled” legal services, or task-by-task representation, greater options are available to the public in accessing private legal advice for at least a portion of their cases. The Ventura County Superior Court continues to encourage *pro bono* attorney involvement by publicly recognizing contributions, and giving priority on the court calendar to those cases in which the attorney is appearing *pro bono* through one of the established volunteer attorney programs in the county.

Preventative Law. A major component of the Mobile Center focuses on education as well as comprehensive assistance for those whose problems reach beyond the traditional court process. The Mobile Center staff “partner” with the local bar association, legal aid providers, and community organizations such as Interface; The Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence; Catholic Charities; Jewish Family Service; Tri-Counties Regional; Protection and Advocacy, Inc; and the Greater Los Angeles Area Agency on Deafness, among others. These agencies and organizations help the Mobile Center staff to address the comprehensive needs of self-represented litigants, especially those with special needs.

The Mobile Center staff also works with the community to present information on substantive areas of law in an effort to reduce legal conflict necessitating court intervention. The Mobile Center has traveled to communities in response to requests for

workshops on specific topics such as landlord/tenant law and guardianship. Problems encountered by people in the community become the subject of additional workshops, videos, and question and answer columns in local newspapers.

B. SCHEDULING THE MOBILE UNIT

One of the greatest challenges with the Mobile Center was in developing a schedule that accommodates the needs of the community, and provides consistency and dependability for those relying on its services. The work hours of farmworkers and day laborers, and their inability to get time off from work during the day, also created challenges in scheduling the Mobile Center. The Mobile Center's original schedule provided for stops on the second and fourth Tuesdays, or first and third Mondays in four different communities. The court found it was difficult for people to compute when the Mobile Center was coming, so the schedule was changed. The Mobile Center now goes weekly to the communities of South Oxnard and Santa Paula, both with large farm worker populations, and biweekly to Ojai and Thousand Oaks, communities geographically remote from the courthouse with pockets of poverty amidst a largely affluent population. It travels weekly to Ventura Avenue where it serves a primarily homeless population, and on the first Wednesday of each month, visits Leisure Village, a senior community in Camarillo. Other cities have requested they be added to the Mobile Center's schedule, and requests are being addressed on a needs priority basis.

The Mobile Center spends two and a half to three hours at each location and assists people with matters ranging from traffic infractions, to landlord/tenant, to family law. The number of people helped at any given time varies. When the Mobile Center staff met with community leaders to find suitable sites to park the mobile unit they were told how some communities are divided along ethnic lines with one population residing primarily on one side of town, and another residing on the other side. It was suggested that the Mobile Center alternate where it parked so it would be equally accessible to both populations. The court found two locations to park in each of the cities of Fillmore and Santa Paula, with one of the locations in each city located within the ethnic *barrios*. After several months of parking in alternating locations it was apparent that the sites in the *barrios* were not getting as much traffic as the other sites. It was also confusing for the public to figure out which site the Mobile Center would be parked at each week, so the court established a new schedule of parking just at one site in each of the cities it visits.

C. STAFFING AND THE USE OF VOLUNTEERS

The SHLA Center coordinators, along with a driver and various volunteers staff the Mobile Center on a rotating basis. Each SHLA Center coordinator is an attorney with strong ties to the community. Besides going out with the Mobile Center to assist the public, the coordinators meet regularly with community leaders. They participate on advisory boards, committees and boards of directors of numerous non-profit organizations in the county. This allows them to network with those agencies to which people may be referred to for further assistance, and helps the court to establish a relationship of trust with the communities the Mobile Center visits. One of the attorney

coordinators is fully bilingual and the other is studying Spanish, in part through a class that was taught at the court during the lunch hour. In order to serve the large volume of people needing one-on-one assistance with a limited budget, the self-help programs have developed an extensive volunteer program recruiting from local law schools, legal secretary and bar associations. Retired business people have also been a good resource for volunteers.

Most of the volunteers who help with the Mobile Center also volunteer in the SHLA Centers. They are usually attorneys, or in some cases, third and fourth year law students who have sufficient familiarity with legal principles to assist self-represented litigants in completing most standardized court forms, under the guidance and direction of an attorney. The students benefit by earning school credits, learning civil procedure first hand, and improving communication skills with the people they serve. The public benefits by having knowledgeable people ready to assist them, without having to wait in line for a single attorney. The attorney coordinators and volunteer attorneys staffing the Mobile Center benefit by having a law student interview the self-represented litigant to distill the relevant facts, and then present the legal issue to the attorney. This spares the attorney's time listening to people vent, while still providing the public with a sympathetic ear to express themselves.

D. COST/BUDGET

Initial funding for the Mobile Center was obtained from a private grant. The grant was for \$40,000 with the opportunity to submit a request for the entire \$108,000 purchase price of the motorhome. Operating costs are contained by the court's reliance on volunteers. Even before the Mobile Center was fully operational, the court received many offers from private attorneys volunteering to help.

Evaluation:

The Mobile Center uses exit questionnaires to evaluate its effectiveness with the public using the service. Because of its ability to move from place to place, the Mobile Center is able to continually adjust its schedule and location to better serve the needs of its constituents. Thus in addition to using questionnaires, one of the best evaluation measures is the level of response from the community as a whole. Are people coming to the center when it arrives? Are people comfortable getting help from the court? These questions can be answered by the number of people we see. The Mobile Center is both a community outreach program and an ongoing experiment to learn how the court can best reach the most marginalized populations, who are often in the greatest need of help.

Transfer or Replication Characteristics:

The Mobile Center concept can be replicated in any jurisdiction where the commitment to serving the public has a high priority. Because it builds on existing resources in the community, the Mobile Center can provide a broad range of assistance with limited staff and money. Private or public grants can often provide seed money to start a program or

purchase a motorhome, but the ongoing costs can be contained through judicious use of existing resources and volunteers. Because of its mobility, the Mobile Center can be adapted to a wide range of needs and services. It lends itself to rural and urban settings, and can be easily adapted to unique demographics in terms of the languages spoken, or materials carried on board. It allows a court to maximize the gain from limited resources.

Additional Process Analysis:

As mentioned above, the Mobile Center presented some unique problems in terms of reaching the target groups. The court, perhaps naively, thought, “if we park, they will come.” This did not prove to be the case, especially in the low-income communities with large numbers of immigrants. One would think the need is greatest in these communities, thus the demand for service would be the greatest. On the contrary, while the need is great, language and cultural barriers, and the inability of laborers and farmworkers to take time off from work during the day, collectively created enormous obstacles, even when the court came right to the communities. The program went back to the drawing board to arrive at a schedule most suitable for the communities we serve. The court also began an intensive outreach program including having the Mobile Center coordinators address city council hearings, post flyers in laundromats, *tiendas* and *panaderías*, and bring the Mobile Center to Sunday Mass at those churches that serve primarily Spanish speaking populations. The outreach is working, but it is a process that requires patience and has been a tremendous learning experience for those involved in the Mobile Center project. Those who have used the services of the Mobile Center and completed exit questionnaires, by an overwhelming majority indicated the mobile center services were “very helpful.”

The Mobile Center will continue to evolve as it faces new challenges in meeting the needs of an ever-growing diverse population. Through the process of overcoming the obstacles we face as a court in reaching the public we serve, we are helping people overcome the obstacles of achieving access to justice. The learning experience on both sides has been invaluable, and hopefully will lay a solid foundation for improved community relations, public trust and confidence and better access to justice for this and future generations.